What is “the affective turn” and where did it come from?

The relationship between literature and affect has long been a fraught one. On the one hand, the discipline of literary criticism derives from early eighteenth-century aesthetic philosophy that can be understood as an attempt to theorize pleasure. On the other, after Kant, criticism is predicated upon the separation of feeling from judgment. Enshrining this separation as a principle of critical practice, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley formulated “The Affective Fallacy” (1949) to name the shame of an emotional entanglement with the literary text. Here, the aesthetic functions as a conceptual mechanism for separating pleasure and value. And if pleasure is such a contested topic, what about pain, what about the ugly feelings? (to use Sianne Ngai’s coinage). And where is the body in all of this?

More recently, the so-called “affective turn” has turned a new attention upon the world of feeling. It returns literary criticism to New Criticism’s scandalous scene of the affective fallacy in order to re-evaluate the languages of feeling. A shaping force in illuminating the value of the affective has been queer theory, in its vital exploration of the transformative potential both of forward-looking utopian desires and backwards feelings such as shame. The affective turn has also been powered by the recognition that emotion and history are not opposed, and that emotion itself has a history. (Indeed, in a dramatic statement of the inseparability of history and affect, the Marxist cultural historian, Fredric Jameson, asserts that “History is what hurts”.) Perhaps paradoxically, new intensities of interest in literary form (e.g. as objectified and “unfelt” emotion) and in the cognitive dimensions of feeling also energize this turn and challenge the distinction between reason and feeling.

We invite papers that engage with any aspect of literature and affect; explore the significance for literature of the affective turn that has informed the humanities more broadly; analyse the relationship between affect and the literary aesthetic; engage affect and emotion to explore (or indeed contest) the singularity of literature. We also invite papers that consider literature and affect historically, and that consider affect, literature and the problem of evaluation (aka judgment).

Confirmed keynote speakers:

- Heather Love (University of Pennsylvania)
- Sharon Marcus (Columbia University)
- Gillian Russell (Australian National University)

Possible topics might include:

- Literary hedonisms and literary pleasure Practices of reading New formalisms Cultures of taste
- Memory and affective histories Affect and temporality Literature and public emotions Theories of affect and emotion Fandom, celebrity, scandal Cognitive literary criticism, psychoanalysis and the neurosciences Pain and trauma
- Sensation and corporeality Sexuality and eroticism Literary and aesthetic judgment Aesthetic-affective moods, modes and tones (e.g. sentiment, melodrama, camp)
- Non-human, impersonal and animal affect Actors and performance Emotions and new media (e.g. memes, avatars, social networking)

Please submit a title and 500-word abstract for proposed papers by Friday 28 February 2014 via the submission form on the AAL conference website.